

## “Why?”

Date: Sept. 2, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Psalm 13, John 9:1-11

Occasion: Why, series

Theme: Suffering, theodicy, punishment, God’s nature

Bad things happen. Hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes can kill thousands of people at a time, destroy homes and business and leave people homeless. Illness can cause immeasurable suffering – physically, emotionally and economically. Children are molested, women are raped, people are robbed, and murderers take people’s lives. Mass shootings can kill many people in a short period of time. War can cause incalculable suffering – to innocent people as well as warriors. The list goes on and on. Bad things happen in the world in which we live.

For many people it is a struggle to continue to believe in God when they consider the suffering of the world. And even for people of faith, they often wonder, where is God when these terrible things are going on? How can we continue to believe in the goodness of God when there is so much pain and suffering and evil in the world?

The author of Psalm 13 captures this sense of frustration and even disappointment in God when he says, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?” Have you ever felt like God has disappointed you, not heard your prayers, or let you down? It’s a common struggle for people of faith.

In the coming weeks, I’d like to invite you into a conversation about these issues. I don’t pretend that in these few weeks we will completely resolve the issue. But I hope to offer you some help as you seek to answer the questions yourselves.

Our disappointment with God in the face of suffering or tragedy or injustice typically comes from our assumptions about how we think God is

supposed to work in the world. When God doesn't meet our expectations, we are disappointed, disillusioned and confused. So to begin, I'd like to invite you to challenge two commonly held assumptions before we try to reconcile God's goodness with suffering.

Many people assume that if they believe in God and try to be a good person, then God will take care of them, bless them, and nothing bad will happen to them. But then, when bad things happen, they are left wondering, "Why is God doing this to me? Am I being punished by God? What have I done that is so terrible that this is happening to me?" Or else, they may think they simply didn't have enough faith. And for some, they even begin to doubt the existence of God at all.

The sweeping message of the Bible, though, is not a promise that those who believe and do good will not suffer. Instead, the Bible is largely a book about people who refused to let go of their faith in the face of suffering.

Consider a few of the major stories of suffering in the Old Testament: Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers. The Israelites spend 400 years oppressed by the Egyptians. Moses serves as God's leader to bring the people out of slavery, and yet he is so miserable at times that he prays for God to kill him. The entire epic poem of Job is about a good man who suffers terribly, and yet refuses to give up his faith.

At the center of the New Testament is the story of a man who is beaten and abused and finally nailed to a cross. His first disciples were nearly all put to death for their faith. The most prolific author of the New Testament, the Apostle Paul, is arrested, beaten and ultimately put to death by the Romans.

The Bible definitely does not teach that those who follow God will have a life of bliss. However, it describes the determined faith of those who continue to trust in God despite their suffering, and it tells about the comfort, strength and hope they find in the face of suffering. So, let's just drop the assumption that if we believe in God then we can live in a protective bubble, safe from all the problems of the world.

The second assumption that needs to be challenged is this one, and it is usually offered as a word of encouragement by well-meaning friends to people going through suffering. Trying to help, Christians may say something like, "Everything happens for a reason."

But what does that mean? Usually we mean "God has a plan. We cannot see that plan right now, but somehow the suffering you are going through now is purposeful and God has a good reason for it. Just trust God."

That sounds pious and it seems logical at first. But let's look at this idea carefully. If everything happens for a reason, and if by that we mean it is part of God's plan, then we have really said, "God planned for this tragedy to come to you. God actually caused it to happen. God wrote this event into your life story."

Really? Let's think carefully about what we're saying here. When a young woman is raped and murdered, is this really the will of God? Did God write this into this woman's life story and into her parent's life story? If God wanted this to happen, then God must have put it into the heart of the rapist to do this horrible thing. Does that sound like a just or loving God?

Think about his - Twenty to thirty thousand people die every day of diseases related to starvation and malnutrition. Is this God's will?

Or is it God's will that those who have the resources work to help those who do not? Is it God's will that a person gets behind the wheel of a car while inebriated, drives drunk and kills another person? Is it God's will when a mass shooter goes on a rampage and takes the lives of dozens of people? Is everything that happens truly God's will, or do we have any responsibility for what goes on in the world?

It is easy to understand why so many people have turned away from God when they have been taught that every disappointment, every tragedy, every loss, and every painful experience was the will of God. What a horrible kind of God to believe in.

Let's begin to consider an alternative way to make sense of the relationship between God and suffering. There are three basic ideas which will provide the foundation for reconciling God's goodness with the suffering we experience in the world.

The first is that God has placed humanity in charge of Earth. In the Garden of Eden, God gave human beings the responsibility to "have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth," That is to say, God gave us the authority to act on God's behalf in managing, tending, and ruling over the planet.

God's primary way of working in the world is through people, who are empowered and led by the Spirit of God. Human suffering then, can be aggravated and made worse, or alleviated through the hands of people like you and me.

The second foundational assumption is that to be human is to be free. God gives human beings the freedom to choose God's way or another way. The ability to choose is an essential part of human experience, and human beings can choose to do good or to do evil.

Finally, we need to acknowledge that human beings have a predisposition to stray from God's path. Our tendency to do what is not God's will is sometimes called the "sin nature." We are inclined to do things that go against what God prefers, and that way will lead to pain and suffering.

My friends, this issue of suffering is so deep and so complex, we can only begin to scratch the surface of it today. Next week I plan to talk about three different categories of suffering and how we might consider God's love, justice and mercy in relation to each of them.

In conclusion, I briefly want to comment on the Gospel lesson. In today's lesson we witness Jesus performing a miracle. As the disciples and Jesus were going about their day's business, they stumble upon a man who had been born blind.

Common Jewish teaching asserted that the reason people are sick is because they are sinful and being punished by God. The righteous are rewarded with good health. The disciples are curious and ask the Master, "So Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that caused him to be born blind?"

Jesus refutes the common Jewish understanding and asserts no one sinned to cause his blindness. But rather, when you meet sickness (and I would add any other human suffering) it is an opportunity for God's work to be displayed. In other words, Jesus is telling us that when there is suffering in the world, it is not a form of punishment, but is rather an opportunity for those who are not suffering to come to the aid of those who are.

May it be so in each of our lives. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Why? Making Sense of God's Will*, by Adam Hamilton. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018, pp. 1-15.